

To All the members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Shanthi Rao and I am a resident of Avon. I am here to request the importance of maintaining and increase in the funding for the Asian Pacific American Affairs Commission as appropriated to address the needs of the growing Asian population in Connecticut.

I am here to speak about my experiences as a social worker, for the most vulnerable population in the Southeastern Asian American community, the senior citizens. I lead a mutual aid women's support group, majority of them who were elderly. Most of them are refugees from Cambodia, Laos, Hmong and Vietnam who were displaced many times after the Vietnam War in 1975. They resettled in the U.S. because they had no other choice. They fled their home countries due to "well-founded fear of persecution" by the government. They were practically all adults when they came to this country. They often found themselves in difficult circumstances. Few understood English or had job skills marketable in the American economy. Some of them could not read or write in their own language. Most arrived with practically no capital and many have relied on a combination of support from younger family members, as well as government support for their basic needs. Many suffer from long-term disabilities resulting from their traumatic experiences in Southeast Asia, and because of their age, many have found it difficult to adjust to life in this country. The tremendous diversity in Asian and Southeast Asian languages makes it difficult for this elderly population to access publicly funded services for senior citizens. They face significant hardships accessing and utilizing health and other services and resources due to lack of transportation, trained interpreters, language and cultural differences. Funding for services and programs has always been an issue.

The process of obtaining their citizenship is a challenge due to their lack of English proficiency, although they are extremely knowledgeable of American history. There are women who face domestic violence in their homes and have nowhere to turn to. They face discrimination in shelters by staff members lacking in cultural sensitivity with no knowledge or understanding of their histories and background.

The lives of Southeast Asian American seniors are especially complex. Many are caught between cultures and simultaneously occupy positions of extreme importance and alienation in their families and communities. On the one hand, they are recognized by the younger generations as important because they bear and transmit ancestral cultures and languages, and simply because they are "elders" and culturally defined as worthy of respect. On the other hand, they are also considered burdensome by the younger generation because they are incapable of successfully navigating mainstream American system & culture. This takes time and resources away from younger family members who are mostly compelled to work outside of the home either for pay or for education. As a result, the seniors are often homebound and socially-linguistically isolated.

It would be in the interest of the State to understand, to invest and support the unique needs of this growing diverse population. Thank you for this opportunity to present my testimony.

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